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The Misted Prism: Paul Akers and Elizabeth Akers Allen

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Slightly more than a hundred years ago, two Maine stars crossed in their courses: the sculptor Paul Akers (1825-1861), whose *Pearl Diver* and bust of *John Milton* were memorialized by Browning and Hawthorne; the poet, then Elizabeth Taylor, now known as Elizabeth Akers Allen (1832-1911), and remembered almost exclusively for her verses “Rock Me to Sleep,” which begin, “Backward, turn backward, O Time in your flight, / Make me a child again just for tonight.” Theirs was a brief encounter, lasting less than three years, much of which was spent apart. Nevertheless, out of this intensive conjunction spurted flames, somewhat lurid, but rendered invisible by the exaggerated reticences of that era. Paul courted Elizabeth, took her on a trip to Europe, married her, and then died, leaving her their daughter. Mrs. Akers was widely commiserated on the premature loss of her popular, talented husband and she said nothing at the time to undermine the public estimate of Paul as an incandescent child of nature, guileless and gracious and good. Yet, in her deepmost heart rankled the truth, as she felt it, and finally she committed it to paper. Her account, here first published, reveals as much about her own aberrations as it does about Paul’s small perfidies. Akers was no angel, but in the light of the letters he wrote her, it becomes growingly apparent that Mrs. Akers did see him through a glass darkly.¹

¹Colby College is indebted to Mrs. Lienhard Bergel, the poet’s granddaughter, for her extensive gift of Mrs. Allen’s manuscripts, letters, books, and memorabilia. The hitherto unpublished version of Mrs. Allen’s marital experience with Akers, and Akers’ letters to her, are part of this collection and are printed with Mrs. Bergel’s permission.
If one is to understand the tortuous motivations of a 20-year-old mother deserted by a handsome and irresponsible husband and now at 26 zestfully besieged by a handsome and impractical artist, it is necessary—in the psychoanalytic mode—to revert at least as far back as her parents. "She inherited merit and physical vigor from her father, and delicacy and refinement from her mother," say the sapient editors of a biographical dictionary issued in the nineties. Her father, Thomas Chase, was indeed strong, and her mother, Mercy Barton, was indeed frail. What Elizabeth profoundly derived from her father, a carpenter and millwright, was a resentful memory of his nomadic ways, his unflinching fervor as a late convert to circuit preaching, and his punishing indifference to her mother's feelings. Elizabeth was born in a strange house while he was on the road "soul-saving" without pay, and from this she drew the gloomy conclusion that "Fate decreed early that I should never have a roof of my own." She recollected her mother as a bright, slender, overworked creature, condemned to long periods of loneliness and terror in wild regions where Mr. Chase carried the Word, and guilt-ridden by the accidental death of one of her children. In a family whose members consistently endured into their seventies and beyond, Mercy died on the eve of her 28th birthday.

Traumatic experiences occurred with cyclic regularity in Elizabeth's childlife. Trying to sweep the hearth when she was three years old, she set the broom afire. As her mother rushed in to put the flames out, Elizabeth backed abruptly into a lighted candle which fell across her "fluffy thatch of yellow hair." The resultant blaze "sizzled and scared" the little girl half out of her wits. Shortly thereafter, during one of her mother's recurrent illnesses, the children were sent out to play in the yard while the doctor (evidently a "bleeding" therapist) treated her. After he left, "we came in again, and found mother looking very white. . . . Going into an outer room, I was horrified at seeing a bowl with blood in it; I shall never forget the terror that seized me, and how I screamed; I knew it was

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*Frances E. Willard & Mary A. Livermore (editors), A Woman of the Century (Buffalo, 1893). 18.*
mother's blood. . . . I never forgot that dreadful day, and all through my childhood I was determined to kill that man if I ever grew large enough: but luckily for him, he died before I was old enough to murder him.” And if that horrendous impact did not suffice to distort her vision, at the age of seven she was kicked in the breast by a colt and knocked unconscious.

In that smouldering household of a moribund mother and a stark, egocentric father, Elizabeth fought with her older sister who favored the male parent, and sulked under the illusion that her sister was “noticed and petted and praised,” while she was neglected because she was a “middle” child and “had a yellow head, something unknown and unpopular in both families, Chase and Barton alike.” If anything, her lot worsened after her mother died. For one winter the children were boarded separately, Elizabeth being placed with a couple whom she characterized as “an old bachelor married to an old maid.” They “made me useful so far as my baby capacity went” for cleaning house and bringing in firewood. When delinquent to their wishes she was whipped. Once she was shut in a cellar “where it was pitch dark and where I was frightened almost into fits.” Often she cried herself to sleep in her dismal bedroom.

Her father remarried in the spring and the family was reunited. As might be expected, Elizabeth found no solace in this new arrangement. Now she was “under two stepmothers—for the stepmother’s mother always lived with us.” Steadily the animus against her father deepened. “He never inquired whether we were happy or miserable; and he really knew but little about us,” she complained. She blamed him for alienating her mother’s relatives, and she never forgave his unsparing consecration to the “senseless sectarianism” which doomed his wife and children.

“Feeling unwelcome at home” and wanting to earn her own living, she took a job in a bookbindery before she was quite fourteen, working under dawn-to-dusk sweatshop conditions. These and her employer, “a thoroughly selfish, narrow, despotic wretch,” she tolerated for the pittance of wages, which afforded her the luxury of independence. She moved on to a teaching position at $1.25 per week, and then in July 1851
married Marshall Taylor, the son of a Presbyterian minister. In the following July a daughter, Florence, was born, after within eight weeks of that event the feckless young father was on his way to California, never again to reclaim his domestic office. Justifiably, Elizabeth expostulated: "In the fourteen months of our life together, he had never put a cent of money into my hand. He had the general agency of a New York insurance company, and he 'supported' me by making me do all the writing in his business, while he went gunning, played ball, and rode about 'on business.' When he went away he took from me my gold watch that he had given me."

To the categories of men who had misused her—father, employer—Elizabeth now added the more intimate one of husband. Her definitive assessment of the entire species should therefore hold no surprise. "When I see how procrastinating, uncertain, dilatory and unwilling to exert himself, the average man is, I do wonder how men have ever accomplished anything in the world. Men are not half so executive, so diligent, so brave about tackling a difficult or an unpleasant job, as even the most unimportant woman is. If the average woman were so feeble of will and weak of purpose, the human race would presently starve to death." If she was not right, she at least had reason.

Her next employment was in the office of the Portland Transcript as "general utility woman," where she "did anything and everything" fifty-four hours a week for a salary of $2.00. She made herself indispensable in both editorial and business aspects to the extent that her weekly pay eventually reached the figure of $8.25 for sixty-six hours of work. Moreover, she "slaved" at night over essays which brought her little and over poems which brought her nothing.

At this point in her career (circa. 1856-1857), a delayed repercussion from California produced another dent in her exchequer and in her opinion of men but, as an uncalculated by-product, cleared the path for her to become Mrs. Benjamin Paul Akers. She had for some time been writing letters to the San Francisco Chronicle, for which she was to receive $5.00 apiece. When she requested payment of $50.00 owing to her, the publisher wrote back that "a man who said he was my husband, had called and collected it. By the shameful law at
that time, he could have thus taken every cent I earned. . . I was obliged to procure a legal right to my own earnings. There had never been any time since he went away, probably, when I could not have obtained my freedom; but I had a horror of divorce, and never should have secured it, but that I was forced to do it, or starve. I had no trouble to procure proof of his licentious life,—and I employed T. H. Talbot, (for whom, when I boarded in the same house with him, I had done many a long evening’s sewing, though I wanted the time to myself for my own work), and although he collected no evidence, in fact, did nothing but make out a few papers and present the case in court,—he made me pay him $50 for his small services,—a sum that it took me nearly nine weeks to earn. This is a sample of the way in which I have been ‘helped’ by my friends, all my life.”

Thus, on the brink of meeting Paul Akers, Elizabeth’s reactions had taken on three definable configurations. Most vivid in the pattern is a powerful ambivalence toward the opposite sex, demonstrated in her father-revulsion and her maternal solicitude for male acquaintances (Talbot was only one of such instances). Also notable was a fanatical concern over money, spawned in a destitute household and developed through a series of Dickensian jobs. (The second paragraph in her memoir commences: “I remember distinctly the first piece of money I ever possessed.”) A third factor was her inclination to self-pity, to parade her altruism, diligence, austerity, her patience and fortitude in the face of chronic adversity. Emergent from the blend of these characteristics is a motif of masochism—a woman who, compulsively or not, manages to inflict herself into situations of service for abysmal wages, who ministers to masculine employers and friends, and is invariably victimized by her beneficiaries. In short, prior to the day she and Paul first met, Elizabeth displayed indubitable symptoms of a full-fledged martyr complex.

II

But oh! who fully can express
Thy cruelty, and my distress?
No human art, no human tongue.
Then fiends assist, and rage infuse!
A raving fury be my muse,
And hell inspire the dismal song!

CERVANTES
Facts are facts and all the psychologizing in the world will not debilitate them. Nothing said above is intended to asperse the honesty of Elizabeth's impeachment of Paul. The particulars of his behavior toward her during their Continental adventure need not be doubted. Rather, Elizabeth's early annals have been adduced as a cautionary measure, to parry the thrust of her acrimony and, conceivably, to account for her rabid unilateral viewpoint.

In October of 1904 Elizabeth completed a remarkable document of forty-nine typewritten pages which she entitled "History of One Woman's Financial Experiences." Starting out with the purpose of recounting monies earned over "40 years of hard labor," she soon veers into excruciating personal exposition—notwithstanding the firm declaration that "I am not writing my autobiography; only my financial history." In her mind the two were inseparable. From the day when, a child, she dug a Spanish copper coin out of her flower garden, a constraint of money seems to have infused every memorable occasion of her life. It cast a baleful light across the frame of her perceptions and seriously refracted her judgment. The opening lines of her "History" bear witness to the insatiate blaze within her.

Because mine has seemed to me a singular, if not unique experience in money matters,—for I surely never knew one person else who labored so continuously under the spell of bad luck in financial affairs, and who, in spite of constant hard work, careful economy, determined self-denial, and an unusual ingenuity in making a little money go a great way—beside the fact that I have spent no appreciable amount in doctors' bills, and almost none in pleasure or amusement all through my life—has been kept continually pinched and poor, and shut out from almost all the sweetness and glory of life through poverty, pure and simple. It seems to me that I have the appearance, at least, of possessing common sense; and yet, nearly every man with whom I have come in business contact has seemed to see in me an easy victim, and has managed—most of them under the guise of sincere friendship—in fleecing me out of nearly every cent I had. Even those who would have been expected to help instead of to impoverish me, have robbed me without mercy of my last penny.

Accordingly, by a somewhat sinuous route, we arrive at the place in Elizabeth's narrative where she reviews her association with Paul Akers, presumed up to his day to have been an ideal match of poet and artist. Except for minor adjustments
of punctuation and excision of irrelevancies, the transcription is verbatim.

"In the spring of '58, I became acquainted with Paul Akers, who had just returned from Europe, in shattered health. He discovered that I had a few hundred dollars saved, and urged me to invest it in a year in Europe; he said I could spend a year there, mostly in Rome, for $500, and it would be an enormous benefit to me in a literary way—(I had been writing for the *Atlantic,* and some other publications which paid me) and he had a friend in Providence, an elderly lady, who wanted to go to Rome when he returned, and it would be an excellent chance for me to accompany the party. She—Mrs. Davis—came to Portland to persuade me, as she could hardly go with him alone; and between them, I finally consented. I had always desired to see something of foreign places, and moreover, I was dead tired out with my monotonous, slavish, drudging life, in which were no vacations and no rest. I had no time for visits, or even calls; I could make no acquaintances, I was utterly alone; my life a perfect treadmill. It was an error of judgment that I went, and from that blunder grew much misery for me. I found that my aunt, my mother's sister whom I loved and who seemed to love me, wanted Florence to stay with her (she had already been there some time, to hide her away from her father's spies) so I left her there, and in November, '59, took $500 from my fund in the Transcript's hands, and went to New York to ship for Europe, Mr. Akers and Mrs. Davis meeting me there. The next day—this was Monday—I found that instead of sailing next day as I had been told (Mr. A. had secured tickets for the party) the ship was not to sail until Thursday. This was a shock to me, as I dreaded the expense of three days in a New York hotel. Monday night Mr. A. said he was going to a broker's to exchange his money for French gold (we were going to Dieppe) and he would take my money and buy gold with it also, as it would save me trouble, and I was a stranger in the city. Of course I gave it to him in utter innocence. But I never again saw a cent

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Elizabeth is slightly beforehand in her chronology. The first of her poems published in the *Atlantic Monthly* was "Bringing Our Sheaves With Us," in August 1858. She was a consistent contributor thereafter.
of that $500. When, supposing he had forgotten it, I asked for it, he said that it was safer with him, as my pocket would be picked if I kept it. My hotel bill and passage-money of course was paid out of it, and when we were once on board the ship (the Mercury, 1600 tons, Capt. French) I again asked Mr. A. for my money; he said I should not want it on the ship, and it was sewed in a belt with his money, and was safe there. Of course, if I could have foreseen this, I never should have started; but what could I do? I was completely helpless. Sufficient to say that although time after time I attempted to get my own money into my hands, I never had one cent of it. And instead of having 'a year of Europe for $500,' when I had been away six months, he told me in Rome that my money was all gone and I must send for whatever more I had in Portland! I had been detained more than a month in Lyons by his illness, a fit of hemorrhage of the lungs, and I had nursed him through it under Mrs. D.'s management; but I knew that $500 had not been spent for me. The plan had been that each should pay one-third of the bills, but I had several times taken third-class places in trains, and had always had the smallest rooms at hotels, as I thought it would lessen my expense.

During the whole month in Lyons I was so terrified at the thought of the unexpected expense that I never once went to the hotel table, but subsisted on bread and water in my own room. I never went to bed once in the time, and had only such broken rest as I could get while sitting in a chair. If I could possibly have escaped, I should have started for home again; but when I mentioned it to P. he always said I was 'killing him,' as he 'should die if I left him'; and whenever I tried to get my money from him, or even a settlement, so that I might know how much I had left, it was the same story—I 'should kill him if I persisted.' Of course I could not go home, or anywhere else, without money; I was quite helpless. Mrs. D., who was old enough to be my mother, instead of being the kind, motherly person she had seemed, turned out to be deceitful, jealous, hysterical, and a sort of professional invalid, who utterly refused to nurse P., as she 'couldn't be broke of her rest,' and she made my position as hard as she could. She was angry at being hindered by his illness, and fretted at me about it, while keeping a smooth face to him; and she suspected that Mr. A. and I were engaged, and tried constantly to
make mischief between us, as she was in love with him herself, though not enough to do the work of taking care of him.\(^4\) I tried again at Marseilles to get my money and start home, but I was ‘simply killing him’ whenever I mentioned it. Probably a more miserable woman than I never went on a ‘pleasure trip.’

When in Rome, I was thunderstruck by the news that my $500 was all gone (besides a cheque for $50 which had been paid me by the Boston Evening Gazette for letters). I had to send to Portland for more; and so drew nearly every cent I had—$300; and when after my return, I did finally get a settlement with Mr. A., he brought me out owing him three dollars! So a little less than eight months’ absence had cost me $850, although I had been assured before starting that I could stay a whole year for $500! Mrs. D. had left Rome a month before I did, and of course that broke up the small household; I went to stay at Mrs. Ropes’s, and my expenses were just 30 cents a day; and yet I paid more than $100 for every month that I was away!

The Transcript owed me a little for letters written while away, enough for me to pay Paul his three dollars, and to buy a few needed garments for myself, as I had not been able to buy any while away. He said ‘his life was in my hands,’ and I was in such terror lest he have another hemorrhage, and call me responsible for it, that if he had told me to swallow prussic acid, I suppose I should have done it. He was sure he should die if I ‘deserted’ him; ‘his life depended on me.’ We were married in July, 1860. His way of talking, and his manner of living, and his many wealthy friends, made it seem as if he had money enough; but I afterward saw that probably even when I first met him, he had not more than $500 in the world, and probably all of half of my $850 went for his own expenses;

\(^4\)Paulina Kellogg Wright Davis (1813-1876) was a controversial figure who inspired similar invective from wider quarters through her aggressive advocacy of abolition, temperance, and women’s rights. Her lectures on anatomy and physiology, illustrated by the first femme modèle used in the United States, swelled her reputation as—in Elizabeth’s words—"a dangerous, unscrupulous, scheming, selfish, immoral woman" who “was hand-in-glove with the Free-love clique in New York.” Childless by two husbands, she tried various stratagems to achieve parenthood. Failing in this, she resorted to adoption. In other notes Elizabeth waspishly advanced Mrs. Davis’ age by more than a decade, and maintained that she “was fat and shapeless, and but for this, would have been wrinkled and drawn.”
certainly it was never spent for me. And yet he protested that he loved me, and that my care of him kept him alive for months when but for it he must have died. After our marriage, he objected to my writing for publication; he said he did not want his wife's name in every man's mouth. But in Philadelphia, when he was on his death-bed, and the wolf snarling at the door, I was obliged to finish and sell some partly-written articles. And I say here, that up to the day of his death, in May, 1861, I had never spent one dollar of his money, nor indeed of any money that I had not myself earned. He never put a cent in my hands. I had been twice married, but had never spent a dollar of any man's money! Paul bought me two calico dresses to wear in his sick-room; these, and one pair of shoes, were all he ever bought me. While we were in Rome, he consented to buy (out of my money) two pictures—landscapes—which he thought valuable, and some specimen bits of old marbles. When we reached Portland, he sold the landscapes for $50 each, and gave the marbles to the Natural History Society. He had given me a beautiful little marble cherub-head that we thought looked like Gertrude; but before I knew it, he had sold that to Charlotte Cushman.5 Of course I saw none of this money.

When he died, there was just $70 in the house. This his brother Charles took for expenses in taking him home. I had a few dollars of my own left. . . . Charles [Paul's brother] then got himself appointed administrator of his brother's estate, though I wished to manage it myself. He said that if I was administrator, the court would appoint a guardian for Gertrude, and besides, how would Paul feel at seeing me take so public a position as that? I could see no indecency in administering on my husband's estate, especially as it was a very simple matter; there were no debts, save one of $8.00 in New York for storage; there were no heirs but Gertrude and myself; there was not even a will to be quarrelled over by his relatives. It was plain sailing. But he assumed to be so fond of me and

5 Charlotte Saunders Cushman (1816-1876), almost an exact contemporary of Mrs. Davis, generated two internationally successful careers, first as an operatic contralto, and later as a Shakespeare tragedienne. A handsome, sanguine woman, she enjoyed the friendship and correspondence of Paul Akers before and during his European sojourn with Elizabeth. Four of Miss Cushman's letters to him are now in Colby College.
the baby, he blamed himself so bitterly because he was 'not able to support me in ease and leisure,' he was so devoted to me, that I gave in, and he managed everything as he chose. I knew nothing whatever about probate law, but after a time, began to wonder why so simple an estate so perfectly unim­umbered, should cost so much time and money to 'settle.' [A detailed account of how Charles sold off Paul’s assets and lived off Mrs. Akers’ slim earnings, while enjoying some unac­ustomed luxuries for himself, follows.]

I should have said in its place, that before my marriage, after I had promised, Paul said to me often: ‘Now if I die before our marriage, go straight to father; he loves you, and he loves me beyond telling; he will shelter you as long as you need it.’ But after Paul’s death, he never even offered me a meal nor a night’s lodging, never invited me to spend a day in his house. His wife once said, I heard, that if I chose, I might stay in her attic; a three-cornered rough-boarded garret, with four small squares of glass at each end, a place where I could stand upright only in the middle, and so dark that one could not see to read there. But even that she did not say to me. Her scampish son Frank came to me and begged from me all of Paul’s clothes that Charles had not taken. The few weeks which we spent in the Akers house after our marriage the youngest girl, fourteen years old, Maria, had stolen many of my garments, my overshoes, many books, pictures, my underclothes, and all the little trifles and treasures that she could lay her hands on. She had even taken my freshly-ironed underclothes off the bars, and worn them! She was a wretched thief. I afterward found that she had opened my trunks, which were left there while Paul and I were in Augusta six weeks (while Paul was making old Reuel Williams’ bust). I was lucky to escape from that family with my life; they took everything else. . . . After that, he never spoke of my going there, and although he knew many wealthy men, and many influential persons, who might have been helpful to me, he never even spoke or wrote to one of them in my behalf . . . he never spoke a word for me. He died calling me his ‘dearling,’ leaving me absolutely in the street, with no resource

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6 This term of endearment, which Paul habitually bestowed on her in his letters, Elizabeth turned to satiric use in “My Dearling,” Poems (Boston, 1866), 118. She cites the precedent of Henry VIII. He called Anne Boleyn his dearling—but it didn’t deter him from cutting off her head.
whatever. My loneliness was doubled by the fact that he had wished me to break off nearly all my old friendships (not that I had time for many) as he wished to choose my friends for me; I must have only such as he liked. So my old friends naturally thought I no longer cared for them, that I had married a ‘rising artist,’ and forgotten them. This accounted partly for my utter aloneness after he died.”

The litany is recognizable as the same she chanted for Taylor and Talbot, the tone now heightened by morbific repetition. With shocking celerity, Elizabeth gets down to the business of her $500. No time is wasted on their delightsome trysts among Maine’s hills and woods and bays, no intimation of the anxious attention she lavished on him through all his infirmities. One must seek elsewhere for evidence of these. For instance, in the assertion by an eminent art historian regarding the “affectionate widow, whose tender care soothed and cheered [Paul’s] pathway to the grave.” Or closer to home, in the wreath of poems she fashioned for him during their slim interlude together and in the years immediately following his death. Forty-three years later and all passion spent, she could well resist the sentimental, but there is no escaping the poignant melancholy of her bereavement at the time it occurred. Grievously alone, she retraced their steps over windy heights that overlook the sea, watched gulls float in the hungry blue, admonished violets to intercede for her, waited dumbly at wayside stones, and yearned inconsolably to join hands with him on “the upward road.” To “Violet-Planting,” an apostrophic dirge, she accorded first place in her collected Poems (1866). It was as close to “Adonais” as she could come.

Was the object of this dichotomous passion actually the callous blackguard she painted him?

III

In several external features the Akers family resembled the Chase family. Both comprised a multiplicity of children and

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7 Henry T. Tuckerman, Book of the Artist (New York, 1870), 616.
8 Some of these—direct evocations or thinly veiled analogues—are collected in her Poems (1866): “Violet-Planting,” “My Soldier,” “Left Behind,” “Consolation,” “A Dream,” “In Vain,” “Believe in Me,” “Two Summers,” “Away from Home,” and “The Upward Road.” Fragmentary allusions in Paul’s letters indicate the existence of others probably never published.
both moved about a good deal. Paul’s father was self-educated, a wood-turner and a deacon—in parallel to Elizabeth’s father. Paul’s mother, like Elizabeth’s, was gentle, sympathetic, and loving. Thereafter, similarities cease: Paul’s youth was as idyllic as Elizabeth’s was repugnant. The difference lay in the disposition and outlook of the parents. Paul’s father was poetic by nature, unpractical, liberal and tolerant, as opposed to the taut, sepulchral Mr. Chase. In time, the elder Akers built a large and happy home for the family at Hollis on the Saco River. During Paul’s boyhood his mother was energetic, spontaneous, and infectious in her enthusiasms, in contrast to Elizabeth’s subdued and suffering mother. If one can believe nineteenth-century biographers who fearlessly assign genetic legacies, “It is evident that from his father the sculptor inherited his artistic tendency, while from his mother came the force of character necessary to insure its development,”9—the reverse of Elizabeth’s case.

Paul, christened Benjamin, acquired the name he adopted for professional use when, as a boy, his playmates called him St. Paul in deference to his sober demeanor. Familiar with poverty from his earliest days, Paul did not take refuge in penny-pinching anguish as did Elizabeth. Instead, he sought alleviation in designing ornamental woodwork, in cutting marble miniatures, and in nature. In the silent contemplation of nature, among dells and streams and pine forests, as “a collector of stones and an observer of thunderstorms” (not unlike Thoreau), his soul exulted and expanded. Fortifying this esthetic richness there was always the love and support of his parents and his houseful of brothers and sisters. Until he died, they represented for him the highest solace, the same persons Elizabeth denounced as thieves and charlatans.

Not before Paul was nineteen did books exert an appreciable influence on him. He read Plato, Aristotle, and Dante perhaps dutifully, then turned avidly to writings that more nearly reflected his own temperament—to the French and German romantics, to Goethe’s doleful Werther, and most particularly to Longfellow’s Hyperion. Akers fancied a rapport in name and type with its hero, Paul Flemming, a lonely, wandering

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visionary who is nursed through a serious illness far from home. (Like Thoreau, again, Akers was afflicted with tuberculosis from youth.)

While in his twenties, and still ambitious to become a writer, Paul went to Portland and obtained a job in the composing room of the Transcript, where Elizabeth was to gravitate a decade later. By 1850 he had settled on art as his lifework and was sharing a studio with John Rollin Tilton, the landscape painter. In 1852 Akers journeyed to Italy. Here he executed sundry portrait busts and bas reliefs, perfecting the techniques which were to make his reputation as a sculptor. But he hankered for "the sweet banks of the Saco" which he found "far more lovely than the Arno or the Tiber," and within a year he was back in Maine. The allure of Rome drew him to Italy again in 1855. This time he wrote: "All that my intellect craves is within my reach. All the demands of my taste may be here satisfied. I am happy, and but for the valley of the Saco, here should be my home."10 He stayed three years, completing among other works the impressive head of Milton which Miriam observes in Kenyon's studio in Hawthorne's The Marble Faun.11

Hawthorne seems to have been quite taken with Akers and to have transferred many of his attributes to the protagonist of this novel. Akers' attention, on the other hand, was beguiled by Ada Shepard, the governess of Hawthorne's children. In truth, he wooed her so forcefully that Maria Mitchell, an American astronomer traveling with the Hawthornes, felt it expedient to advise him that Miss Shepard was already betrothed. It is reported that this had no detectable effect upon Paul's ardor.

We are now at 1858, the beginning of what may be termed Paul's Elizabethan period. Elizabeth states unequivocally that she first encountered him in the spring of that year, on his return from Italy because of precarious health. One disputant, Rose O'Brien, submits that they knew each other during 1850-1852. "Dr. Francis Staples tells of the meeting of these two gifted people. The doctor was called one midnight in what

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10 Ibid., 463.
11 See the "Preface" and Chapter XIII for references to Paul Akers. The "grand, calm head of Milton" is now at Colby College, as is a letter from Hawthorne introducing Akers to Emerson.
he supposed was an urgent sick call, but upon arriving at the Hay boarding house he found a gathering of people who were 'sitting up' to watch the blossoming of a night-blooming cereus. In the group were the young sculptor, Akers, and the young newspaperwoman, Elizabeth Taylor.\textsuperscript{12} The circumstance sounds credible enough, for both were entranced by natural phenomena. The time, however, seems unlikely—Elizabeth was married and not yet abandoned. It may well be that her husband was also a member of the group and that Paul Akers would have had no appeal for her, but as a journalist she would surely have remarked his presence and not utterly forgotten him.

In any case, the vital convergence occurred in 1858 when Elizabeth was assistant editor and general factotum at the Transcript. Paul's brother Charles, working there as a compositor, proposed to bring Paul around to see her. She professes to have declined. Nonetheless, Charles—or Paul's—persistence prevailed, with the outcome as noted in Elizabeth's memoir. Although Paul's courting methods were unquestionably intensive, as his letters show, the pair was separated frequently in the ensuing three years. Following their Italian junket, they were married in Portland in the summer of 1860. Shortly thereupon his physician recommended that he move southward. Paul set up residence for himself in Philadelphia, where he died in May the next year. "Even in the waning hours of life," writes Tuckerman, "he requested to have his bed moved near the window, that he might watch the crimson tip of a maple bough."\textsuperscript{13} The ravaged body was buried beside his beloved Saco River, under a pine tree which, not long after, shaded the grave of their infant daughter Gertrude.

IV

\begin{quote}
O do not slander him for he is kind;  
Right,  
As snow in harvest. 
\end{quote}

SHAKESPEARE

There is ample testimony to refurbish Elizabeth's portrayal of Paul as a willful miscreant. Like the rest of us, he adjusted his personality to accord with the individual or the pur-

\textsuperscript{12} Lewiston Journal, Magazine Section (January 21, 1961), 3-A.
\textsuperscript{13} Book of the Artists, 617.
pose of the moment. He contained in full measure the human weakness of indulging mere acquaintances and overtasking those close to him. Bitterly, Elizabeth protested that “While he was a proverb for his liberality among his outside friends . . . he was always mean and niggardly to me, as his wife.” From the world at large, however, Paul attracted uniform approba-

tion. Hawthorne, not overly given to socialities, informed Emerson benignly, “I have had much pleasure in his acquaintance, and am sure you will be glad to know him.” Tuckerman, the art chronicler, extolled Paul’s “native candor and generous sympathies,” his “tenderness,” “kindliness,” “sweetness,” “un-

usual sensitiveness”—and concluded that “he had an almost morbid shrinking from giving pain to others.”14 And, in conclusive refutation, Leila Usher certified Paul as “A self-reliant man, positive in his judgments, but modest and unassuming, possessed of great personal magnetism . . . deeply loved by his friends, for whom he in turn manifested a strong unchang-
ing affection.”15

Akers was, without quibble, a winsome man whose appeal far outreached Elizabeth’s narrow confines. Inevitably, the glamor of his occupation fetched bevyes of available ladies to his door—and he was nothing loath to accommodate them. His amorous duplicities, pointedly those when he and Elizabeth were abroad together, must certainly have been another irritant to her, for she tallies his maneuvers with a girl in Paris, one in Portland, an English heiress, Mrs. Davis, Charlotte Cushman, and Emma Stebbins (she may not have known about Ada Shepard). For a spell, as did Poe, Paul tried desperately to repair his state by way of an affluent marriage. And the prevalence of elderly women on his roster suggests his need for a surrogate mother. Elizabeth Taylor must have struck him as the fortuitous solution to both problems: she was not wealthy, but she did have enough for a year in Rome for the two of them; she was demonstrably a coddler of inept men, an instinctive sewer, nurser, sacrificer. There was more to it than that, of course. They were alike in their worship of nature, and he prized in her the fulfillment of his own aborted desire to write.

14 Ibid., 613, 615, 617, 618.
15 “Benjamin Paul Akers,” 466-467.
More revealing that any deposition made about his qualities by friends or biographers, and far more convincing, is the impression of Akers that rises from the letters he wrote Elizabeth during their short attachment. Discounting the extravagant rhetoric common to the expression of passion in that day, these are the letters of a man genuinely in love. One finds no petty conniving over disputed sums here. If any, the fault is one of utter and pathetic dependence, before and after he married her. Where Elizabeth in her recollections stressed money and drudgery, Paul in his missives wove devotion, longing, nature metaphors, aspiration, and *Weitschmerz*. Granted that Paul misapplied Elizabeth's hard won dollars, who is to deny that he redeemed them several times over in more precious currency? However deviously he comported himself on the material plane, his fundamental feelings toward her are unassailable.

The following thirteen letters are transmitted *in toto* so that none of Paul's quixotic shifts may be scanted. His overweening urge is for reunion with Elizabeth, interspersed with sadglad nature imagery and trifling diurnal matters of people and packages. To remove distraction, Paul's occasional spelling lapses have been corrected and his punctuation regularized in such places where it attempts no accessory effect. Paul's initial dream of a literary career might have been realized had he persisted along that line. He commanded a vocabulary of imagination, apt at federating words (sunbrightness) or fabricating them (unlove) to suit his nuance. Long before E. E. Cummings made a mode of it, Akers utilized spacing-on-the-page with meaningful overtones (see Letters 1 and 4). Not one of his notes is fully dated. Chronology has been established through postmarks on several accompanying envelopes, through Elizabeth's numbering, or through internal clues.

**LETTER 1:** probably autumn or early winter, 1858; lacks address, date, salutation, signature. It is perhaps the most vibrantly lyrical, Paul's spirit overflowing at the end into graphic eloquence (see illustration inside back cover).

Are you angry with me that you do not write?
Have I offended?
Do you mean that we shall no longer be—friends—or what we are?
Oh, do not let aught come to separate.
Believe in me, and if you believe in me write—much.
And also send me the paper of the week I left, as well as those since—and likewise send the poem you spoke of—that for the Past—and and love me.

Two weeks gone! two—When will there be mayflowers, or red blossoms on the maple? “I long to see a flower so, before the day I die.”

Did Aurora Leigh come to you? I feared after it had gone, that the initials might make trouble, at the P. O. Did they?

Oh, Child, speak many loving words to me. Heal me—warm me—soothe me—and do not lose me, for when I am lost, I am lost.

Through his gift of Aurora Leigh (1857), Paul was calling Elizabeth’s attention to the semblance between herself and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s heroine. An orphan without financial resources, she is brought up in the uncongenial home of an aunt, and eventually leaves to support herself by her pen.

The reiterated plea “believe in me” appears as a refrain in Elizabeth’s verse of that name in Poems (188-189). It is often impossible to determine whether Paul is echoing her words or she has expropriated his. Paul’s despondent finale, however, seems clearly to stem from her “Lost and Saved” (Forest Buds, 182-184), the sixth stanza of which reads:

Lost, poor friendless child, forever,
Castaway on life’s wild river,—
Lost! amid its wild commotion
Rushing down to sin’s dark ocean!

LETTER 2: addressed to Florence Percy, her literary pseudonym, at the Portland Transcript office; from Boston, December 30, 1858.

Maine winters were anathema to Paul’s lungs. He fled at the first onset of cold.

Now, little one, I am gone, gone. You see, I don’t come in: forty times a day the door swings, and you look up—but—

I, too, feel that I am no longer there, near where you are.

There, the norland wind, cruel, snow filled, zero wind, doesn’t reach me now. I’m warm, “and oh so still.”

Alas, my friend, I cannot deceive myself. It is all death, and frost, wintriness and unlove. No thought of my own is angel enough to roll
the stone away from the sepulchre of this day, and give my soul its
garden privilege: ever the dreary-happy freedom of our garden on the
windy hill.

Dear Child, hold me in the warmest place, until we two are maying.
The first warm, immeasurable day, reach, and draw me softly up to
you.
Do so now, now, then, and forever.

Paul

For Elizabeth’s skeptic rejoinder to “dearling” see note 6, page 203.
The phrase “immeasurable days” crops up again in the first
stanza of Elizabeth’s “Two Summers” (Poems, 199-200), where
she recalls their last summer’s wanderings through leafy forest-
ways.

LETTER 3: to Florence Percy, at the Portland Transcript
office; from Providence, R. I., January 1, 1859.

New Years

Oh thou blessed one! On this first Evening of the New Year, now that
the funeral tears have ceased, and the red west only tells of weeping
which has been, and nevertheless, sunbrightness—now that thou hast
become, in addition to the precious thing thou wert—more dear, inas-
much as we are in possession of a mutual Past, a holy, warm, June
Past in spite of December death about us, a Past which lies back in
the sweet security of a safely sealed fear, on this Evening, I call for
thee.

You do not come! I hear the pulse of the watch over my heart, the
remote sound of wheels, and the far away voice of a dog. You do not
come.
Nor is there the white, bleak, beloved hill, nor the sea, nor ships,

nor the ghostly gull.

Oh, do not say it, do not tell—it is true that I love the life—brief,
frozen—trampled though it was, led by us two—too much.

Why do you not come? I am alone, and all is so still! Is it
because I am alone, and all is warm and still and beautiful about me,
that you cannot come?

Must we, to meet, stand upon the tottering icy wall? clinging to each
other to keep ourselves, that is, the bodies of ourselves from frosty
fates? If so, then I accept; and will stand there—till June. But I do
not believe it. No, our God knows we love his green, blooming earth,
and he will not withhold it.

We “shall walk beside the still waters.”
Are you struggling to come?
There comes the awful inaccessibility.
How hard, how cruel, and inexorable seem the stiff fields, the sullen
forests, and the black sea! the snaky streams and the pitiless hills!
But these are nothing, nothing—Love is all.

Dearling,

Paul

Paul's perceptible reverence of the past—capitalized in this
and the first letter—is expounded elsewhere in less porous
language: "a great Past—in which the soul has ever borne on
through and above all obstacles of discouragement and tempta-
tion to a success which was its inheritance."16

There was a gothic aura in the love of nature avowed by both
Paul and Elizabeth. They acutely sensed the skull beneath the
skin. The ghostly gull, the black sea, and the snake (Eden
destroyed) recur in these letters; Elizabeth's poems are re-
dundant with blight, flowerless summers, and June without
birds. It was of course a Romantic convention to be half in
love with easeful death. For these two it constituted another
zone of coalition.

LETTER 4: to Florence Percy, at the Portland Transcript
office; postmarked Providence, R. I., January 5, 1859.

Dear Flo,

I am called away, and send this, because I wish to send a book,
which was to have gone on New Years.

Thou art a good child.

Love me.

On New Year's Evening I waited here in this little cottage many
hours, alone. You didn't come.

Sunday was Sunday.

I tried to go where we could see the ocean, you and I. But I could
not find it.

Monday I awoke with a fever consuming me, and a raging sick
headache. When Carl was sick that morning, you begged permission
to come and nurse him; I, who loved you more, called to you, and
besought help, and you gave no heed.

Oh, today!

Such a storm. Do you remember that storm-day when
I came in, and sat so long watching the white whirls over the roofs?
I didn't know how blest I was that day, inasmuch as there, far out,
whither I went, you still were.

I'm thinking Flo, that from that day when we first stood together
overlooking the sea, there was a new dispensation.

Henceforth life was to be more or less, sadder or brighter.

Which?

24 [Paul Akers], "Our Artists in Italy," Atlantic Monthly, VII (February
1861), 134.
Why do I think so much of what you told me of the 'Poem'? I read it after, and each time it seems more sweet and noble, and a new feeling pulses through me, as the thought comes that there is no grave, and that it is of me, "me and thee!" then suddenly—I am dead.

Why did you tell me that it was written before we went up there? and not of any love for me?

Carl is Paul's brother Charles.

Several possibilities exist, but the most likely "Poem" to which Paul refers is "Left Behind," published in the Atlantic Monthly the month this letter was written, and collected in Poems (36-38).

LETTER 5: to Florence Percy, at the Portland Transcript office; postmarked New York, January 12, 1859.

T's office, 9 A.M.

You have gone without speaking to me, leaving me grieved and wounded.

If it—this which you have done—was the result of any unkindness or shadow of untenderness on my part, forgive me, for whatever I may be to others—for yourself there is infinite tenderness in my soul's heart, and with it, equal reverence. I have felt to care for you as for few others.

But if this was in no wise associated with myself—a mere forgetting—tell me I pray you, for I should know.

Love

Paul

LETTER 6: to Florence Percy, at the Portland Transcript office; from Providence, R. I., March 11, 1859.

Elizabeth's enumeration indicates that Paul sent four more letters in the intervening two months. They were not found in her collection of papers.

In the summer of 1854 Akers had maintained a studio briefly in Providence before going to Washington, D. C. At Newport he had entrée to both social and intellectual levels, a frequent guest of the Edward Kings and the Charles Eliot Nortons, among others.

Providence
March 11th

I wanted to come to you, my Child. Eleven days ago, for that was the first day of Spring, but could not, even in this poor way, because no Spirit of Spring was abroad. Yesterday it came!

I could have cried for joy when in the early morning there came that wonderful song of the robin! Think Flo, what it must have been.
Five years with no robin song, and then to be awakened by one which had not only its own rare value, but other, as the divine prophecy of a new Spring which must be to me more than ever Spring was.

April is not many days.

How purple and soft will be those islands far down the Bay, when we shall stand in the old place.

Indeed, my dear friend, I am possessed by this yearning to pass over these few weeks and come there, where I can grasp the life which seems awaiting me when I can take what is to be mine.

How feel you about my coming? Not as when before I was coming from yonder? I thought yesterday morning when it was so bland and fragrant, that in somewise you were longing for my coming. I thought that you would be glad to have me not so far away when these happy-painful days befall you.

I have many words, but few minutes, for in a little time I shall be sailing down this bay to Newport where be the Sea. I will remember you tenderly.

Paul

LETTER 7: to Florence Percy, at the Portland Transcript office; probably from Providence, R. I. (the postmark and stamp are excised), March 20, 1859.

The designation of address is Paul’s coy protestation of enforced exile.

St. Helena

Sunday

Dearly Beloved.

Will you not write to me and say that the days are warm enough for me to come home? I am tired of this, no matter what the outer world may be.

" 'Tis cold and stormy here with me
'Tis warm and oh, so still with Thee!"

Let me in!

See, here is a primrose! It grew on the banks of Avon, nineteen days ago, Avon over there in England, where I want to go with you.

I have just been reading of birds; how the ‘frigate-bird’ flies eighty leagues an hour. Eighty leagues—480 miles! I could be tapping with my impatient beak at that attic window in 27 minutes. You would think me “Seabird” and bid me ‘Godspeed’ out over the black sea:—restless, nestless? No? Then will I come.

It is said that some birds fly untiringly as long as the sea is beneath them. I wonder if there isn’t something like this in other life. I could fly forever, if there were no shores to the love-ocean. Do you love my Father?

You must.

You do now, for you can see.

I am glad you went to our home, and sorry, for I should have been there with you. I know the fine places.
I think continually of a boat going away in those bright island channels, miles and miles, with us two. Did you ever read “Walt and Vult” by Jean Paul? The book closes with Vult walking down stairs, and off along the highway, and playing his flute, until he and his music fade in the dim distance. Thus we go in the boat, off—off—with the waves playing—off—forever. Did you read the description of the azure grotto in those letters of Ase’s? May we reach some untroubled sea—like that.

We shall talk together, weeks, when I come, for we have much to say, I think. Will you please me in this? and keep for lIllY perusal all that I may see of what you have written within the year? Those poems which have reached me, I prize, lovingly, as I do you. I long to be with you again. Ah, there is so much—if we can only claim it! Do not allow “Flo” to forget me; teach her to love me somewhat, and teach her mother to love me infinitely.

Paul

“Let me in!” is the repetend of Elizabeth’s poem of that title in Forest Buds (143-144).

For Elizabeth’s diametric response to Paul’s father and family, see pages 203-204.

Walt and Vult are the protagonists of Jean Paul Richter’s Flegeljahre (1805), a romance on the Wilhelm Meister theme of youth’s agonizing apprenticeship to life. They represent the opposing forces of idealism and worldliness, sentimentality and skepticism, the heart and the head. They embodied, simply, the conflict within Richter himself, between the dreams of his soul and the drives of acquirement. Akers saw his own situation mirrored in this book. He soared in a paradise of art, yet had to scrabble for the wherewithal to subsist. Akers and Richter had another pertinent trait in common: they spiritualized women in their writing and used them to canny advantage in actual practice.

Flo is Elizabeth’s daughter by her first husband, Marshall Taylor.

LETTER 8: no envelope. Probably addressed to Florence Percy, at the Portland Transcript office; from New York, July 1, 1859.

The Akers family lived in Hollis, Maine.

New York
July 1st

Dearly Beloved,

Do not fail me on Saturday eve. I come purposely to see you, and
shall be more disappointed than you will even know if you are not at Hollis.

I walk about like one in a drama, so wonderful has been the effect of that great day when "we two."

You remember we used to say, "Would that we two?" All comes, and all will come, only be patient, and utterly true.

I am homesick. Here are no sparrows, nor are they needed.

Paul

In ten days comes my birthday. I wish to make an engagement with you for it, and for the seventh.

LETTER 9: to Florence Percy, in care of Deacon Akers, Hollis, Maine; no indication of date, the envelope without stamp or postmark. The context denotes that the letter was written in the Portland Transcript office, where Paul once worked as a compositor.

My dear Child.

See how the rain pours! I am sitting in your chair, near the ivy vine, and feeling the utter lonesomeness of the place from which you have gone.

God help you, if you remain here after I have gone, and the snow comes flying about yonder granite cornice! The very thought of it makes me cry.

We cannot move the statue in this rain. So I must wait. Tomorrow I hope it will be accomplished and then, I can come.

I shall write to Mrs. Davis today that you will go and ask her to come to Portland next week to complete arrangements. Will you write to Perterson today or tomorrow.

Pick doesn't look very disconsolate. I do.

Good bye dearling.

For identification of Mrs. Davis, see note 4, page 201.

Pick is Samuel Thomas Pickard (1828-1915), biographer of Whittier. In April 1855 Pickard became joint owner and editor of the Transcript, remaining in these capacities for the next forty years. Elizabeth sewed shirts for him too, and he is said to have been Paul's closest rival for her hand.

LETTER 10: to Mrs. Lizzie Annie Akers, at Mr. Smith's, Norway, Maine; from Boston, September 4, 1860.

In the interim between this letter and the preceding one, Paul and Elizabeth had spent some eight months in Italy and France, had returned to Maine and been married. Compliant
to his doctor’s instructions, Paul was now gradually wending his way to Philadelphia for the winter. He was to die of consumption there in May. Elizabeth’s “Castles in Spain” (Poems, 100-101) bespeaks his mirage of an eternally warm oasis of love eastward and far away.

Boston
Tuesday, 10 A.M.

My Darling Wife.

It is one day nearer Saturday! That is my comfort this morning. Do not tell me that this beautiful day—almost an Indian summer day—should make me glad. You know, better than any other, how all fair things pain the homesick. But I shall come to you, and I shall not again be separated from that which is my life and my home.

How glorious was last night! I had a room by myself—alas, your empty berth was there—and from my pillow I could see the road to Spain going far away. Eastward.

The sea was smooth, so quiet that I slept well, and awoke this morning to find myself in Boston.

Shall I give dry details of the days? Yours would be precious to me. Perhaps mine will not be worthless.

I took my little bundle and went out upon the wharf. How lone-some everything looked! Some sailors were singing as they pulled the ropes, a few squalid children were digging in an ash heap for bits of coal, one solitary Civitá Vecchia looking hack waited. Into this I got, and placing our plaster cast on the seat before me, drove off to the caster’s shop in School St. I was too early, and so cast and I were left waiting on the sidewalk.

I walked back and forth, and thought of you, stopping to put my hand on some marks you had made on the mould. Soon there were sounds of shutters—of many feet—then came my man. The first thing I saw in his shop was the head of Mr. Sackett, so that was all right. Then I went—or rather came—to breakfast, a poor one-sided affair, but I ate nevertheless, for duty’s sake. Went out again, lingered by the fruit stands to examine peaches, and by the windows of many shops to see if there might be something of ours there. Then came to Ticknor and Fields, where I received “congratulations.” Found there an invitation to visit Lowell. Was strongly urged to continue papers in the Atlantic.

Thence went to Williams and Everett’s picture store, and was there talked to a long time by Willard, the artist who painted those portraits of Mr. & Mrs. Usher.

At Garri’s I heard that Stevenson the sculptor had been seeking me. So I called on him and stayed ten minutes during which I was very homesick. Ugh! what a place. We, darling, will line our shell with pearl—won’t we?

Now I am back at Parker’s. Here you were once.

I looked in at a goldsmith’s. What think you he asked for setting the agate? “He could set it, in some cheap way” for four and a half.
I don't know when the mail goes. Should it be later in the day, I will write more. Now I hunt for marble for Sackett.

Let me hold you to me, hard, close, so, every bit of you. Put your arms about me, my babe, harder. Now let Flo come and put hers about our two necks and bind us together.

I am thine own husband.

Mr. Houghton is here.

Dear Child—the mail goes now—love me—love me, all and think often how much—how utterly I love you.

The plaster cast Paul mentions here may have been the medallion likeness of Elizabeth which, according to Tuckerman (616), was “the last work he accomplished in Rome.” Elizabeth's cracked copy of this cast is now at Colby College (see illustration in the center fold).

James Russell Lowell, currently editor of the Atlantic Monthly, wrote to Akers on November 18, 1859 (Colby College ms): “I should like to have you go on with your articles... I need not say to you again that I set a high value on your contributions—that goes without saying, as the French say. There is no use praising men that are worth praise.”

Akers' total contributions to the Atlantic consist of: “The Artist-Prisoner,” vol. IV (October 1859), 419-420, a poem of thirty-two couplets and a perorating tercet; a series of three articles with the omnibus title of “Our Artists in Italy,” the first in vol. V (January 1860), 1-6, a critique of Hiram Powers; the second in vol. VII (February 1861), 129-137, a critique of William Page; the third, subtitled “Landscape Art,” posthumously published in vol. IX (February 1862), 162-170, which includes among others an assessment of John Rollin Tilton, his first studio partner in Portland and later in Rome. Tuckerman (614) finds “mature reflection and expressive beauty of diction” in these essays. Veritably, they exhibit academic control hardly to be expected after the volatile emotionalism and fluorescent prose of his letters.

William Willard (1819-1904), portrait painter of Daniel Webster and Charles Sumner, as well as a celebrated panorama of Boston seen from Bunker Hill, was active around Boston during the fifties.

Stevenson the sculptor is Peter Stephenson (1823-1860), who specialized in cameos but also did portrait busts and ideal figures, known for his statuary group Una and the Lion.
LETTER 11: to Mrs. Lizzie Annie Akers, at Mr. Smith's, Norway, Maine; from New York, September 5, 1860.

Less than a year before, Paul, Elizabeth, and Mrs. Davis had embarked from New York City for Dieppe on the vessel Mercury, which Paul plaintively envisions here.

New York
Wed. morning

My precious wife.

How little while ago—how infinitely long ago, was one day here in New York, on which I was writing to you. I loved you then, but it was not a thing of life or death. What a sweet thing it was to go back, to go down to that house, to sink back into the gloom of the hall so as to be undiscovered a little longer. Then how like a revelation, "a voice from heaven," came the sweep of your garment as you escaped up the stairs! But now, now. What would it be, — —

Dear Child, I am here at last. I came as we came months ago. The night was like that—starlight—long snaky waves, black and gold, only the moon waded.

When I had sent the letter from Boston, I went for marble, here, there, everywhere, and at last when it was approaching the hour for New York, I went out toward Brookline to see Carew the sculptor. Here my luck came again. He had just one block, perfectly adapted to my wants. I had to let him carve the bust however:—so today he begins it.

How homesick it made me to go to that same depot whence we started, to sit in the same place and look out on the same hills and trees.

This morning I was aroused by the New York shouts on the wharf. It seemed like voices of hell.

I paused a moment when I reached the head of the slip, for a stone's throw away was the place where lay the Mercury.

Do you remember those dirty streets leading up to Broadway?

I stop at the Astor House, it being so much nearer my business, and now I am at Livermore's, in Wall St., too early for him, but not too early for you.

When L. comes we will go to the Custom House, and attempt the delivery of our package. Then I shall go up to see the Pearl Diver, after that shall take from the N. A. my bust of Gerritt Smith, which, I think, I will forward to Portland.

All looks desolate and repulsive here without you, darling. I could not live here with you away, nor elsewhere. Separate from you there is no world for me—no more life, here or hereafter.

Oh love me, my wife, love me with no common love, but infinitely. Dear Child—dearling—press from my heart the only sorrow it has, that deathly one of feeling that you love me less than you might. All pain, all sorrow, all agitation is comprised in that, born of that—love me all and nothing of these shall ever darken our threshold again.

My love, my beautiful, I kiss you. Kiss our Flo, my little one.

Your

Paul
Joseph Carew, under whom Paul first studied plaster casting in 1849, was associated with his brother Thomas in Carew & Company in Boston.

The Dead Pearl Diver is by far the most renowned of Akers' works, finished in the cool, smooth neo-classic style of the period and overlaid with Paul's innate idealism (see illustration in the center fold). It is uncanny coincidence that the lines "Pale and drooping as a bruised lily" and "Part the wet curls from his marble forehead" appeared in Elizabeth's "Drowned" (Forest Buds, 22-23), for the statue did not predate the poem; Paul's memoranda indicate that he started modeling it in November 1856 and completed it in May 1857. At the dedication exercises of the Portland Library three decades later, Mrs. Akers read "The Pearl Diver," a 232-line ode specifically lauding the stone youth and his creator (as well as herself in the guise of St. Elizabeth of Hungary). The poem is reproduced in the program booklet prepared for this occasion; printed in Auburn, Maine, by the Lakeside Press, 1889, pages 26-34. A variant manuscript is also at Colby College.

N. A. is the National Academy of Design in New York City.

LETTER 12: to Mrs. Lizzie Annie Akers, at Mr. Smith's, Norway, Maine; from Boston, September 6, 1860.

Dearest Flo.

My beloved wife, could you realize, or even suspect the joy and peace your letter gave me, you could do no otherwise than weep in excess of happiness, as I did when its loving noble meaning came to me. I could but fall on my knees and thank our God for it all—and for you.

New York was insufferable. I found that Livermore had succeeded in getting the 'case' into his possession, only the day before I reached N.Y. and that it was to go to Portland,—at any rate was beyond my control.

I thought of Page, and at the very summit of a building on Broadway, found him. He sat in a little dusty attic room, was bending over some small drawing. I stood near him before he saw me, then he shouted a welcome. The interview was long and very interesting so I shall keep it to tell.

But all the time I was haunted by the thought of your letter at the Parker House. I could not wait for the boat, took the Ex train and rode nine hours and a half, that I might get your letter four hours sooner.
Now I am full of business, working a little on the bust, looking about some for you and Flo, and settling the matter of the Sackett head with Mrs. S. who is here. When she called at Garri’s she told me that Mrs. Davis had been to see me!

Dear, dear Child, I shall be with you soon: then shall I be blessed.
The package went to Mrs. Mills.
This afternoon, I will call and see Shilabar.
The mail goes at two P.M. and I must send this. Yet I wish to write more.
I wish I could tell you, so that you would know forever, how utterly I love you, how utterly I yield myself to your every thought, every feeling, every wish or hope. Believe me, my darling, possess me, please, for I have, and am, nothing.
Believe me, my babe.
I have a State Room for tonight. All well. I shall get the bust photographed tomorrow.
Will write.

Love me, Flo. Sit by me and talk to me of all things gently strongly earnestly.
Ah hold me with strong arms to your heart. Make me strong and well, and calm as was my wont before this sorrowful illness. Then you shall see me all worthy of your reverence, for I know myself.
Dear wife, dear daughter, I kiss you with many kisses, many, many.
Paul

William Page (1811-1885), a painter of portraits and historical scenes, is remembered for his Browning and Longfellow, his Flight into Egypt. He was a prominent member of the Anglo-American colony in Rome, dubbed “the American Titian” by his contemporaries. Akers wrote a panegyric on his work in the Atlantic Monthly, VII (February 1861), 129-137, presumably stimulated by this meeting.

Shilabar is Benjamin Penhallow Shillaber (1814-1890), the American editor who printed Mark Twain’s first extended piece in The Carpet-Bag, and who created the popular figure of Mrs. Partington, a small town Yankee malaprop. Shillaber was living in Chelsea at this time. Mrs. Akers’ eulogy on him appeared in the New England Magazine, n.s. IV (June 1891), 429-434.

LETTER 13: no indication of precise date but undoubtedly written during his last peregrinations toward Philadelphia.

Forgive me, dearest, my dearling, my wife, that I saddened you so
by my selfish sorrow: I who should be so glad, so unceasingly happy since I have you, since I can say "my wife." Forgive me, it shall be no longer so. Do not ask me to be cheerful until I see you, for truly, dearest, this is a new and utter desolation.

Oh you cannot know how inexorable the necessity has become for you, how useless has become all other means of consolation, how painfully my heart craves your love, could you see it all.

Love me Flo, love me all, let it be the UTTERMOST. Save me with your love.

Teach me to be altogether that which you would love in the fullest.

I will change for that, will change anything, everything.

Yet that will not be necessary. I have much that you love, many qualities which your nature demands and which it will find nowhere else. Our sympathies are broader than any two have ever known—so it seems to me—and I love you, love you infinitely, love all of you with a love that makes you holy and sacred. You would not change these?

But do see, my own child, that much of this which has made us unhappy has been born of the tyrannical love I bear you. I love you so much—live in your presence and in what you choose to yield me so entirely—I that, so put away from me, or risen away from all other sources of peace, that I am helpless in your power. Your tenderness makes my whole world one of immeasureable joy, the absence of tenderness makes the whole miserable winter, the future a black sea, with a ghostly gull, and at my benumbed feet a hissing of wrathful sleet.

Oh Lizzie darling, remember how when we together saw that sea and heard that sleet, we folded each other close, close, until there grew a bland, sweet June, everywhere.

I pray for my wife, as I would pray God to help me, to fold me away from any more agitation. You speak truly: I am far from well. I know it, for while my soul and heart cry out for you, to clasp you, to find rest in your arms, my poor body quivers with its tormenting complaints. Then do, I implore, help me.

I will help myself. There shall be no more such.

I kiss you, my baby, kiss your forehead, and eyes, and chin, your arms, bosom, and sweet lips. Kiss me so, kiss me over my heart, often, often, that there may be no more pain there. Kiss my darling Flo and tell her she is indeed my child, and I will be in God's sight indeed her Father.

Husband — Paul

I could get no ink, darling, with blessing words.

Paul's letters exude a kindlier light than that shed by Elizabeth's memory. Under the screen of his spangled elocution and-courtly capering (cliches to be expected of a sentimental amorist) pulses an unmistakable sincerity. The need to allay his inveterate loneliness, to find a stable haven, he translated
uncritically into the imperatives of love. As an artist he embraced the doctrine that the inner life is all. From an esthetic point of view external gyrations are of no consequence; purity is within. What Elizabeth decried as arch-iniquity, Paul deemed an irrelevant peccadillo. Else, having dissipated her known reserves, why did he marry her and keep on writing letters of undiminished adoration?

The onus of Elizabeth’s misery must, in fine, fall upon herself, upon her demonic absorption with money. It had the tenacity of a medieval curse, for her troubles in this matter did not terminate with Paul. They persevered without pause until the end of her own life.

First, with his brother Charles, “a rather bright but morbid youth” whose ailments she tended and whose clothes she mended. By means not wholly honorable, she records, he extracted from her the right to administer Paul’s estate. The upshot of his copious frauds—minutely documented in her “History”—is that he garnered some $900 for his services, whereas she learned later that the entire settlement should at best have cost no more than $25. True to form, Elizabeth depicted him as unscrupulous, self-indulgent, indolent, and impractical—adding, without apparent awareness of its ferocious irony, “but he was rather good-looking and attractive in conversation. I liked him very much, as I was then apt to take men at their own valuation.”

She had barely detached herself from this mess before she was totally entangled in another. The lines of development are egregiously familiar. While working in Washington, D. C., Elizabeth met Elijah M. Allen, a man so goodhearted he stopped children in the street and bought toys for them. Photographs of him in young manhood show the same soft charm of countenance as Paul Akers’. Allen wooed Elizabeth with expensive gifts, swore she was the apex of his life, and promised her domestic equality and the good life if she would marry him. This she did in October 1865. Before long, the whole sorry cycle was again in motion. He borrowed or stole every penny she accumulated, squandering all on foolish investments. He made a ruinous royalty arrangement with Ticknor & Fields for her second book. He foisted his stepmother (an opium
PHOTOGRAPH
of
PAUL AKERS

ELIZABETH
AKERS
ALLEN

MEDALLION BY
PAUL AKERS

http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol7/iss5/3
et al.: The Misted Prism Paul Akers and Elizabeth Akers Allen

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addict) and his half-sister (an epileptic) upon her. Elizabeth carried on interminable arguments with him over an infinitesimal weekly allowance, but she did not “from that day in 1865, until November 1879, ever have a dollar of his money in my hand!” Three husbands, three predators. She had succeeded again in attaining self-mortification. It was a condition of pain that reconciled for her the wrongs of the world and the weakness of men. To suffer was to atone. She took grim satisfaction in acting the female messiah, drinking vinegar and wearing a coronet of thorns.

Avarice was not Elizabeth’s flaw; she was as free with her means as her namesake “the lovely saint of charity, Elizabeth of Hungary,” a subject of Paul’s sculpture in whom she saw a certain similitude. Where then was the chafe? Was she remembering her childish hatred of her Spartan father and forever expiating it? She never changed. The penultimate sentence of her “History” throbs with implacable misanthropy: “Long ago I laid aside $100 for my burial expenses, for the man who has pinched me so all my more than forty years with him, shall not spend a cent on me after I am dead.”

A NEW REVIEW OF THE CAREER OF
PAUL AKERS, 1825-1861

By WILLIAM B. MILLER

In the preface to The Marble Faun Nathaniel Hawthorne acknowledged that, for his literary uses in the novel, he had “laid felonious hands upon a certain bust of Milton, and a statue of a pearl-diver, which he found in the studio of Mr. Paul Akers.” In the book these statues become works by Kenyon, the young sculptor of Hawthorne’s romance. Today the bust of John Milton belongs to Colby College, and The Pearl Diver forms part of the permanent collection of the Portland Museum of Art. (See illustrations in center fold.) Every printed notice about Akers cites The Pearl Diver and its connection with The Marble Faun. It is clearly Akers’